

**KCADP Press Conference, February 10, 2015, Kansas Capitol Rotunda
Prepared Remarks, Peter Goerzen, Chair, WDC End the Death Penalty Task Force**

Good afternoon. This afternoon, I speak on behalf of Western District Conference, a regional conference of Mennonite Church USA, with which Bethel College is affiliated. We are delighted to count Rep. Becker among our members.

“From our Anabaptist origins in the sixteenth century, Mennonites have believed that God is love, that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus’ teaching and example witnessed against the killing of human life. Our spiritual ancestors were persecuted for their opposition to killing.”¹ Today, “we acknowledge the deep grief of families of murder victims. . . hold them in our prayers; and commit ourselves to walk with them.”²

“We seek to be followers of Jesus. The teaching of our church has consistently opposed the death penalty.”³ Over the past 50 years, Mennonites in this region have adopted four resolutions against the death penalty, reflecting the convictions articulated by our national assembly and stated in our *Confession of Faith*.

“We believe that God created the world in love and peace. Humanity chose ways of unrighteousness and violence, yet the original vision of peace and justice remained alive in the developing drama of salvation.”⁴

Time and again, our Scriptures teach us, God forgives and redeems individuals. In the light of God, **the Death Penalty is morally bankrupt**. “Killing people because killing people is wrong” skews morality toward revenge and contributes to a culture of vengeance and death. It does not honor the conviction that all human life is sacred and created by God and therefore within God’s sovereign purposes and ability to redeem. Public policy must not stand in the way of that possibility.

Rooted in God’s redemptive justice, the Bible calls for justice in human relationships and in the courts. There is no convincing evidence that the death penalty is a deterrent against violent crime. Rather, with its bias against the poor, minorities, and certain locations, **the death penalty distorts justice**. The execution of an innocent person, a reality given human fallibility and bias wherever the death penalty is practiced, is a distortion of justice that cannot be undone. Our vision of justice is not retaliation, but restoration, healing, and fairness, leading to “peace, quietness, and trust forever.”⁵

The death penalty cheapens justice by trading its noble claims for those of a much different desire: retribution. We do ourselves and our culture a great disservice when we confuse justice with retribution. Justice puts an end to cycles of violence through restoration and healing, while retribution merely continues the cycles of our murderous desire. We know that “an eye for an eye” does not represent the fullness of God’s desire for humankind.

We dare not confuse retribution (death) with justice (life), though too often our culture does indeed choose death. Vengeance can never bring justice; the closest we can come this side of eternity is to offer our steadfast compassion and love to victims’ families while restraining perpetrators from further violence.

Instead of making life safer and more just, the death penalty perpetuates deadly cycles of murderous desire, hatred, and retaliation. Jesus teaches deliverance from those cycles through initiatives of peacemaking, forgiveness, love, and mercy. These practices are all grounded in the very character of God, who makes the sun to rise and sends rain on the evil and on the good.

Finally, **Budgets are moral documents**, and death penalty cases cost four times more than non-death penalty cases. In a climate of budget shortfalls and major spending cuts, it is disturbingly ironic that programs and institutions promoting life, hope, and future are being cut, while the costly death penalty remains untouched.

For all these reasons and more, most major Christian denominations have taken official positions against capital punishment. We join these groups in urging the Kansas legislature to support House Bill 2129 by ending the death penalty in Kansas.

1 2009 Western District Conference Resolution on the Death Penalty.

2 2001 Mennonite Church USA Resolution.

3 2009 WDC Resolution.

4 2009 WDC Resolution.

5 Isaiah 32:17.